

La Règle du jeu

(The Rules of the Game)

‘For us there was only one French director, and that was Jean Renoir’, said Claude Chabrol, while François Truffaut called Renoir ‘the greatest filmmaker in the world’. New Wave directors, as critics, had turned to Hollywood to elaborate their theories of authorship. But when it came to practice, they followed in the footsteps of their mentor, André Bazin, in idolising Jean Renoir (while, in typical polemical fashion, rejecting practically every other French filmmaker).

This was in the '50s, when Renoir was working again in France after his Hollywood episode (and films in India and Italy). With the exception of *French Cancan* (1954), however, his post-war work did not match his pre-war achievements, either commercially or, despite the efforts of *Cahiers du cinéma*, critically. It was also in the '50s that *La Règle du jeu*, after its disastrous release in 1939, was being rediscovered, to great acclaim.

The perennial presence of *La Règle du jeu* towards the top of best-film polls raises interesting questions for film history, as does Renoir's position, since the New Wave, as the world's idea of a great (European) *auteur*. Are there some objective qualities in Renoir's work which dictate its presence in the roll call of excellence? Is it possible to account for Renoir's eminence in the pantheon of great *auteurs* without resorting, or resorting only, to subjective value judgments? And why is it this particular film which has been singled out within an *oeuvre* that is not short of masterpieces?

The fact that it is *La Règle du jeu* which endures among the ‘great films’ rather than, for instance, the more politically committed *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (1935), or in another vein *La Grande illusion* (1937) or *La Bête humaine* (1938), both immensely popular at the box office and with critics at the time of their release – gives us a few clues as to how such judgments emerge. *La Règle du jeu* – is a film with a legend. There is a poignant, *maudit* aura about it. It came out shortly before the Second World War – and thus will forever be deemed to ‘foreshadow’ it – and, more importantly perhaps, it was a resounding failure. It suffered banning at the beginning of the war, and prints were later destroyed by bombs. It is also a ‘difficult’ film, often a baffling experience on first viewing, though a rewarding one eventually. And this, of course, is, as the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argues, a condition for ‘great’ (bourgeois) art, as opposed to the popular, which delivers its goods straightforwardly. Accordingly, the limpidity of *La Grande illusion* seems a faint embarrassment to many critics; it is, somehow, ‘too easy’ or ‘too obvious’; whereas one has to work at appreciating *La Règle du jeu*.

Renoir, perhaps like all great *auteurs*, was both typical and exceptional. His ‘greatness’ comes from the combination of both qualities in his work. His declaration that ‘Each time I make a film, I am honestly and sincerely motivated by the desire to please the public’ was not a rhetorical claim. Unlike many French *avant-garde* silent directors such as Jean Epstein or Louis Delluc, who had problems making the transition to the talkies or did not make it at all, Renoir thrived with the coming of sound, which tremendously enlarged film production and audiences. He became a star filmmaker of the '30s, equally prominent in committed left journals like *Cine-Liberté* as in the fan magazine *Pour Vous*, read by millions.

Renoir's choice of material was very much of his time. His fascination with French social *milieux*, popular and aristocratic, had a long history and was shared by many French filmmakers. Audiences clearly liked this very ethnocentric cinema. *La Chienne* (1931), *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* and *La Bête humaine*, in their depiction of the working class, should be seen in conjunction with other populist melodramas to appreciate how typical, almost banal, are Renoir's iconography, settings and characterisations, yet how individual is his rendering of them.

The reverse side of this sociological coin is provided by *La Règle du jeu*, which focuses on the aristocracy. Partly on Renoir's own indication, *La Règle du jeu* is always seen in the light of classical and romantic French theatre. Yet it also owes something to a decade of boulevard play adaptations – a pervasive, less 'noble' and critically much decried genre of French cinema. Both the cheap, 'quickie' *Chotard et Cie* (based on a play by Roger Ferdinand) and the accomplished *La Règle du jeu* are informed by a derision of institutions characteristic of filmed theatre, its disregard of complex character psychology, and its frequent appeal to an 'upstairs, downstairs' dramatic structure.

The praised unconventional morality of Renoir's films, from the cynical ending of *La Chienne* to the 'cover-up' of *La Règle du jeu* and the sexual games of its characters, should also be placed in the relatively permissive context of '30s France – permissive mostly in male terms that is, and Renoir is no exception here. Renoir's mixing of comedy and drama – *La Règle du jeu* is called a *drame gai* – is also within this tradition, as is, on the whole, his use of actors, despite the claim, initiated by André Bazin, that Renoir used actors 'against the grain'.

More than any other aspect of his work, it is Renoir's *mise en scene* and cinematography that have been singled out as exceptional, particularly his use of long mobile takes and staging in depth. The scenes of the arrival of guests at the chateau and the antics of characters in its corridors in *La Règle du jeu* are often-quoted examples of this exceptional use of the camera. But the fact is that long and mobile takes were quite common in '30s French cinema and many directors used longer takes than Renoir. Clearly cinematographers were trained for this type of camerawork, decors were built to accommodate it, and actors were used to it.

This was a style developed partly in response to the theatrical tradition, which Renoir too was familiar with. But if he was following a practice widespread in French cinema, his specificity was to systematise it and, especially, to put it to the service of a more cinematically naturalistic environment. And, of course, he used staging in depth more than any other director – using several layers of corridors, doorways and windows, constantly opening and shutting spaces, with characters weaving in and out of them, where others were content, on the whole, with lateral reframings. Renoir's cinematography is always seen as resistance to, or at least difference from, Hollywood. This is not so much untrue as incomplete, for it ignores the fact that it was also part of the French mainstream. This difference should properly be seen as part of a national tradition, rather than just the invention of one genius.

Renoir's films of the '30s dominated French cinema, not just because they were different from it, but because they summed it up and extended it, and, what's more, extended it in ideologically sympathetic directions. Renoir's populism became increasingly backward-looking and out-of-synch with French audiences after the war, but in the '30s it was sharpened by the politics of the Popular Front, by anti-fascism and by pacifism. If Renoir is still the world's idea of a great *auteur*, able to pursue his own preoccupations while addressing a popular audience, it is important to see that this was due

to the conditions in which he worked. This is why Renoir was such a role model for the New Wave, but one they could not possibly replicate, because these conditions had forever vanished by the time they started to work.

Ginette Vincendeau, *Sight and Sound*, December 1992

LA RÈGLE DU JEU (THE RULES OF THE GAME)

Director: Jean Renoir

Production Company: Nouvelle Edition Française

Production Manager: Claude Renoir

Unit Manager: Pillion

Administrator: Camille François

Assistant Directors: André Zwobada,

Henri Cartier [i.e. Henri Cartier-Bresson]

Scenario/Dialogue: Jean Renoir

Screenplay Collaboration: Carl Koch

Directors of Photography: Bachelet, Jacques Lemare, Alphen,

Alain Renoir

Stills Photography: Sam Levin

Editors: Marguerite [Renoir], Mme. Huguet

Art Directors: Lourié, Douy

Music: Roger Desormières

Sound: De Bretagne

uncredited

Assistant Director: Carl Koch

Script Girl: Dido Freire

Gowns: Coco Chanel

Musical Themes: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Monsigny, Camille Saint-Saëns

Music Arranger: Joseph Kosma

Subtitles, Restoration: Lenny Borger

Cast

Nora Gregor (*Christine de la Cheyniest*)

Paulette Dubost (*Lisette, Christine's chambermaid*)

Mila Parély (*Geneviève de Marras*)

Odette Talazac (*Charlotte de la Plante*)

Claire Gérard (*Madame de La Bruyère*)

Anne Mayen (*Jackie, Christine's niece*)

Lise Elina (*radio reporter*)

Marcel Dalio (*Marquis Robert de La Cheyniest*)

Julien Carette (*Marceau, the poacher*)

Roland Toutain (*André Jurieux*)

Gaston Modot (*Schumacher, the gamekeeper*)

Jean Renoir (*Octave*)

Pierre Magnier (*the general*)

Eddy Debray (*Corneille, the majordomo*)

Pierre Nay (*Saint-Aubin*)

Richard Francoeur (*La Bruyère*)

Léon Larive (*cook*)

uncredited

Tony Corteggiani (*Berthelin, huntsman*)

Roger Forster (*homosexual*)

Nicolas Amato (*South American*)

André Zwobada (*engineer at Caudron*)

Camille François (*radio announcer*)

Henri Cartier-Bresson (*English servant*)

Jenny Hélia (*kitchen servant*)

France 1939

106 mins

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Shoah Sun 5 Mar 11:00; Sun 12 Mar 11:00

Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans Sun 5 Mar 11:45; Mon 6 Mar 14:00; Mon 13 Mar 20:35

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Citizen Kane Sun 5 Mar 16:15; Tue 7 Mar 20:30

Cléo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7)

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2001: A Space Odyssey

Sun 5 Mar 19:00; Thu 9 Mar 18:00

Au hasard Balthazar Mon 6 Mar 18:30

Vertigo Mon 6 Mar 20:30; Thu 9 Mar 14:30; Wed 15 Mar 18:10

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The Night of the Hunter

Tue 7 Mar 18:00; Sat 11 Mar 20:45

Mulholland Dr. Tue 7 Mar 20:10; Tue 14 Mar 20:15

Beau Travail Wed 8 Mar 14:30; Fri 10 Mar 20:45; Mon 13 Mar 18:20 (+ intro by Catherine Wheatley, Reader in Film Studies, King's College London)

Daisies (Sedmikrásky) + Meshes of the Afternoon Wed 8 Mar 18:20 (+ intro)

Close-Up (Nema-ye Nazdik)

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The Godfather Fri 10 Mar 19:00; Sun 12 Mar 18:15

Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles Sat 11 Mar 18:50

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